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ABSTRACT

This proposal is a plan to involve undergraduate participation in major educational issues which would be constructive for the development of an alternative school program. The summer period is envisioned as the crucial development period for the undergraduates and the design phase for the alternative school. In September, leadership training groups could begin to implement the alternative school by selecting sites, experiences, staff, and students according to criteria exacted and established during the summer. A staff training group will develop a model orientation/staff training program that could be applied to other evolving alternative schools. A possible type of operational structure for the alternative school would be vertical age grouping. This structure has the following four age divisions: (a) members of the program ages five through eight, (b) those individual ages nine through thirteen, (c) those from the age and grade range of the traditional high school, and (d) the leadership training team and other resource personnel. Each family will involve equal or near equal numbers of groups a, b, and c, and at least three participants from group d. Evaluation of the program will consist of personal assessments and a continuing effort to respond to proposals and appraisals with programmatic changes. (RC)

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A PROPOSAL

FOR UNDERGRADUATE STAFFING

OF ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS

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A Proposal for Undergraduate Staffing of Alternative Schools

Introduction

The task of present educational freedom and reform is to leave behind the traditions and assumptions of the last one hundred and fifty years. To loose the binds of the heritage of American education upon every level of the present and alternative systems for an opportunity to change them has not been, and does not promise to be, a quick, nor an easy process. The terms "alternative school" and "free school", as well as "open classroom," integrated day," and "open environment" have become fixed as bases of current educational philosophy, theory, and language. Perhaps the most recent and widely read account of this nation's program of formal education is Charles Silberman's Crisis in the Classroom. As a critic and reformist of current education, Mr. Silberman's dominant theme centers around the "mindless" nature of our schools. His criticism primarily covers outdated curriculum, authoritarian and insensitive teachers, and the rigid structure which forms the backbone of our present educational system. The following proposal was conceived as a result of these and similar thoughts. What follows is a plan to involve undergraduate participation in some major educational issues, where such contribution would be found appealing to the undergraduate himself, and

constructive for the development of a truly alternative school program.

An Alternative Philosophy

A. Justification. When given the opportunity, students can act as potent change forces in educational processes. The increasingly successful involvements of students in a broad array of projects and programs affiliated with the School of Education at the University of Massachusetts have proven the value and the advisability of using students as personnel resources. The benefits of student involvements may be generalized as follows:

1. Students maintain a high degree of idealistic commitment when confronted with challenging social problems.

2. Students enter new situations with open minds and fresh and intelligent insights. Their exceptional physical mobility seems to translate, in turn, into a great mental flexibility.

3. They are attuned to a mode of constant self- reflection and self-evaluation.

4. They carry a sense of hope and bouyancy--and extremely high energy levels-- that can serve as an inspiration to others working with them.

5. They have access to a vast number and variety of university resources, both mental (faculty and other students) and physical (libraries, television equipment, workshops and laboratories, etc,).

6. They are closer to the experience of education as a student than staff members generally are, and consequently have a more natural empathy with the role of "student" in an educational setting.

7. They are an extremely inexpensive personnel resource.

B. Objectives. A program should intend to develop a core group of bright and innovative upper level university students, with strong commitments to the improvement of education in the kindergarten through the twelfth grade, into a leadership team that will examine formal education as it presently exists in our society, design a new alternative school, and initiate the operation and direction of that school. The overall and principle objectives of the program I consider most possible are four-fold.

1. The development of a leadership program for the training of a new cadre of educational leaders.

2. The implementation of an alternative school as a working model, beneficial to the school system in its own right.

3. The development of a documented model (or models) for broader dissemination and replication.

4. The complementary development of a staff training program in the alternative school for use also as a model for replication.

C. Formal Program.

1. Leadership Training. (Summer) The summer period

is envisioned as the crucial development period for the students and the design phase for the school. The leadership training group should begin to develop the bonds of a working relationship--to build a team-- that must last for the entire year. Features of the summer should include an intensive reading/brainstorming seminar focussing upon the ills of the present educational system and its established structures, and positioning a variety of alternative approaches in order of their feasibility; a study of institutional change both theoretical and practical; the use of group problem solving techniques; and simulation and role-playing exercises for developing change strategies.

The latter phase of the summer period could be devoted primarily to exploratory conversations with surrounding school systems and communities, to visits to a number of alternative educational settings, to an actual design of the school, and to the development of initiation of intervention strategies once a focus has been determined.

(Academic Year) In September, or as soon afterward in the school year as possible, the group could begin to implement the "Alternative School," selecting educational sites and experiences, staff, and students carefully, according to criteria exacted and established during the summer. Thereafter, implementation will consist of team involvement in, and direction of school operations (in cooperation with the school system), continual evaluations of, and reflections upon the emerging "school" programs, and documentation of the entire design/implementation/

evaluation process both for internal application as well as for maximizing the possibilities of dissemination of the resulting model.

Throughout the calendar year the project director, a necessary position, serves as the leadership trainer and facilitator of group activities, providing a base of educational knowledge and expertise for critically analyzing both traditional schools as well as new and evolving designs, and for sustaining the design process. In addition, he will act as the major liaison between the University students and the public school system selected, both in negotiations for a "school" and in long-term relationships compatible to all concerned. His role will doubtlessly assume many functions including that of teacher, counselor, learner-participant, group facilitator, arbiter, and diplomat. He will also accept major responsibility for assuring the documentation of the entire training and model building process.

2. The "Alternative School." It is difficult to specify a precise description of an alternative school since such an enterprise will and must derive its appearance largely from the composition of its participants. However, to a great extent its description can be found in what it will not look like--namely, the authoritarian, inhumane, and "mindless" institutions which presently comprise the bulk of American education. In developing such a school the following generalizations about its

appearance can be drawn:

a) Attendance will be in compliance with state law; participation will be voluntary.

b) It will include a diversity of students reflecting the racial and ethnic balance of the community, and hopefully will include a broad cross-section of ages as well. It will not cater to any special group of children.

c) Students will be actively involved in its operation and direction while parents and the overall community will be encouraged to participate in the enterprise. New staffing arrangements will be developed in an effort to integrate members of the community as a part of the school.

d) A central "meeting place" will be provided but will serve more as a resource center for people and media, schedules and lists of events, than as a centralized and formal educational institution used exclusivelyfor teaching and learning.

e) The curriculum will be based more upon the community, the interests of participants (i.e. students, staff, etc.), the larger society, and personal experiences, than upon textbook curriculum.

f) The kind of structure provided will depend upon the capacity of individuals to act comfortably and meaningfully within given learning situations. That is, a person conditioned to require a very structured learning process cannot be thrown into a vacuous abyss of complete freedom. Rather, such persons, and it is likely that the

majority of students entering such a setting will be in this number, must be given an opportunity to acquire, gradually, major responsibility for their own learning process.

g) The staff will attempt to create an environment where relationships are direct, honest, and personal, and where an emphasis is placed upon learning as a human and sharing experience, rather than such a purely objective and competitive activity, as it has come to be widely regarded.

h) The basic skills required for "survival" in our society--reading, mathematics, manual skills, and the ability to communicate with others-- will form an important academic dimension of the school but will be handled on very individualized bases. Skill development will be undertaken with the conviction that skills can be more easily, meaningfully, and quickly learned through an informal and individualized process than through a highly formal and regimented one.

i) An emphasis will also be placed upon developing personal recognition of new sets of survival skills in our society based upon more realistic ecological principles and upon the growing need for greater intercultural and interracial cooperation among all people of the world.

j) It will develop new areas of focus--how to learn and use resources for creation of a more flexible working force.

k) It will attempt to alleviate the fear of failure.

l) Learning will be viewed as part of life, the world

Two or three group members will remain with the school that has evolved to help in assuring its continuation and to extend its operation and effectiveness.

In the second year a more comprehensive process of evaluation whould be developed.

Evaluation

Evaluation of the program should consist of a process of on-going documentation. In large part this will consist of personal assessments and a continuing effort to respond to these proposals and appraisals with programmatic changes.

The common denominator for the evaluation of any type of educational experience, especially concerning an alternative school should be : Does the child enjoy it?

Because of the compulsory education laws, children are compelled to spend almost a third of their waking hours in school. If a child can enjoy school to such an extent that he has to be told to go home, we could say such a school possesses the fundamental criteria of success--happiness. A happy child is one that is succeeding, in this case, succeeding at learning.

This type of school should grow and change with continuing, critical and constructive evaluation by students, teachers, parents and observers. It will be a responsive and responsible educational tool.

A school of this nature should utilize the techniques, research, and personnel at the University concerned with

of nature and man as our classroom and all people as students and teachers and sharers of life.

Hopefully the persons that leave such a setting will have acquired a genuine sense of joy in learning and in human relationships, will have a better understanding of their strengths and weaknesses as learners and as people, will be more self-directed in their learning process, and will have developed more fully their feelings of self-worth and their potential as loving human beings.

3. Staff Training. The major intent of this group will be the development of a model orientation/staff training program that could be applied to other evolving alternative schools. In addition, staff training would be offered to other schools in the school system.

The focus of the staff training group will be upon analyzing the emerging needs of staff members within the alternative school and creating experiences to meet these needs. For example, as less traditional staffing patterns emerge, and greater numbers of professionals and paraprofessionals from the community are drawn into the school, training and orientation programs will be designed to ease the process of integration.

4. Second and Third Year Objectives. At the end of the first year the program could be extended whereby members of the leadership team, either as individuals or in small teams, will lead their own core groups and begin to design and implement a new group of alternative schools.

effective evaluation. For example, one technique, the use of student portfolios, is helpful in putting growth and education on a personal level, combining teacher observation with a student's own perception of his growth and learning development.

Such methods seek to replace arbitrary comparison, judgement and competition with new and personal criteria for success-- the individual goals of students, teachers and the school system.

"Teachers almost invariably take their pupils as they find them; they turn them, beat them, card them, comb them, drill them into certain forms, and expect them to become a finished and polished product; and if the result does not come up to their expectations (and I ask you how could it?) they are indignant, angry, and furious. And yet we are surprised that some men shrink and recoil from such a system. Far more is it a matter for surprise that any one can endure it at all."

"For more than a hundred years much complaint has been made of the unmethodical way in which schools are conducted, but it is only within the last thirty that any serious attempt has been made to find a remedy for this state of things. And with what result? Schools remain exactly as they were."

--John Amos Comenius
The Great Didactic, 1632

It seems that throughout the last four hundred years of world history, the great minds of the arts and sciences of various backgrounds have shown a great concern for educational structures and systems, and their reform. Kept within the reality of life itself, this is not an overwhelming fact at all, for each of the great minds who call for educational reform--among them, John Dewey, William James, Matthew Arnold, and Alfred North Whitehead--by necessity passed through the same system they hoped to change. Education becomes a great part of every man's life, for the simple reason that

he must endure it for such a great time span of his life. It would appear that out of man's quest for knowledge, variety of experience, and tremendous technological advancement and development would have come just enough insight to make school something other than a chore.

The members of the core group of the leadership training team for alternative schools will have also been forced to endure the required years of an authoritarian and insensitive traditional classroom. It would be their goal to create a learning environment for students K-12 that offered them the joys of discovery and learning which most of our education has managed to neglect. Students will become involved in the program as a manifestation of their own frustrations with the present system, and with the hope that they might play an important, delegated part in its change and reform.

The leadership training team should meet for the summer months in an attempt to coalesce their feelings and philosophies concerning the process of education, in general, and the investigation of alternative measures and structures to be incorporated into the creation of a new educational experience, in particular. Their theories and ideals might appear very similar from a surface perspective, but the differences which underlie them will no doubt be profound. In the development of what they consider to be a workable structure, they will come to the vital realization that they are just as much individuals as the students they hope to

contact, and just as their educational processes as learners will differ in regard to development, interest, and motivation, so the group's educational processes as facilitators will be unique due to the same factors. Therefore the structural framework will of necessity incorporate flexibility and adaptability.

The freedom with which they plan to invest in the potential of the individual learner will most likely come as a confusing and internally limiting force in the lives of those who do not know school or learning or education by any other earmark than that of subservient obedience. To these individuals is offered the greatest challenge--that of overcoming the frustration and anxiety of structured and methodical "lessons," and becoming the explosive and buoyant force of change within their own lives, through the discovery and investigation of their personal interests. As members of the leadership training team, it is the function of the participating university students to create, encourage, and support valuable educational experiences for the growth and development of their learners. An example of the type of operational structure that a leadership training team of university undergraduates might find most appealing follows:

Vertical grouping of the inclusive age ranges of the program will be termed "families," and will be the units of joint interpersonal and community relationships. The structure involved in such a vertical age grouping has primarily four age divisions:

(A) group would consist of all students that are normally enrolled in the kindergarten through the third grade of the traditional system, or in other words, all members of the program ages five to eight years.

(B) group will be comprised of those individuals that would traditionally fall in grades four through eight and/or ages nine through thirteen.

(C) group will be drawn from the age and grade ranges of the traditional high school.

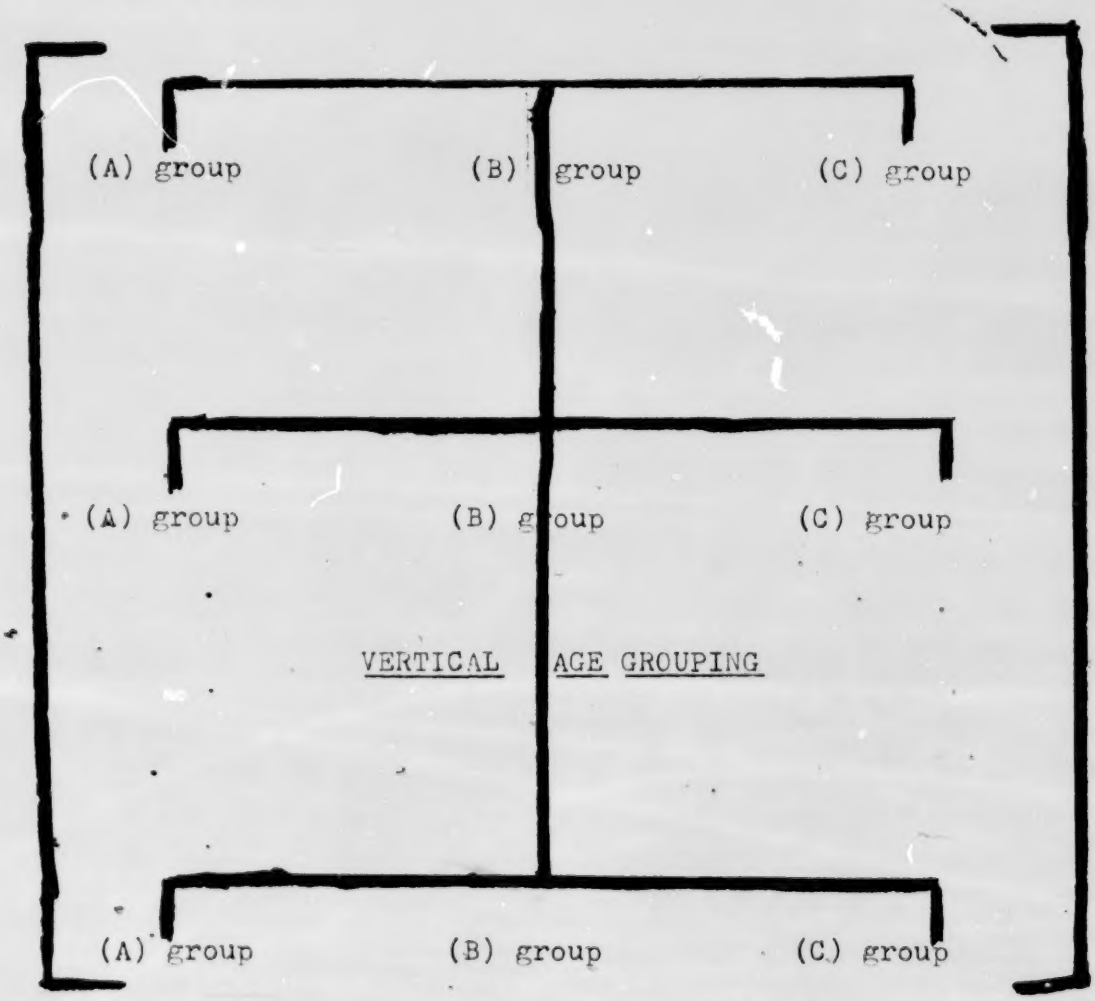
(D) group membership will include the leadership training team and other resource personnel.

The members of (D) group may decide their preference as to which of the other age groups they could work most comfortably with, and will assume the capacity of adviser for a determined number of that group's membership. Relationships will hopefully be formed first between adviser and client, second within the membership of the family unit, diffusing more readily to the third level of interpersonal relationships, namely, that involving the entire school.

Each family will involve equal or near-equal numbers of groups (A), (B), and (C). Each family should have at least three participants from the (D) group, one concerned with each of the other age ranges comprising the family unit. Thus one adviser and his clients from each of the age ranges will consolidate into a family structure.

The family structure also permits jointly the grouping of horizontal, or lateral, age ranges as exists

in the traditional graded-schcol. For example, the (B) group members of each family may wish to organize an inner structure without the inclusion of older or younger members of the learning community. The following is a diagram introducing the major possibilities within the family unit structure:



The participation, interest, and reliance in the family unit structure by members of the program will determine its success. The flexible nature of the alternative school will permit destruction or abandonment of the structure if it should prove unhelpful.

Conclusion

Rather than competing with the public schools, this project is designed to work with a system which can offer its resources, personal cooperation, and support to complement the efforts of an undergraduate leadership training team. The alternative school would work to bring together the added resources, experience and support of the universityand the community to provide an exciting and productive learning experience for some students who would not otherwise have such an opportunity. The project is also designed to be a learning experience for all co-workers in the school system.

The alternative learning center would strive to provide the skills and resources necessary for children to deal responsibly with technology, to solve problems not yet posed, to survive amidst constant change, and to live humanely and creatively. Every person (and therefore every child) must take responsibility for creating his own life--the way he will relate to society. This must be an ongoing process that does not start solely upon graduation. If the learning environment breathes internalizing control throughout the "school years" the child will realize that his "entrance" into and responsibility to society is immediate and not postponed. The program outlined in these preceding pages attempts to provide within the structure of the school ways of active involvement in the larger community and society.

The use of a majority of undergraduates as a staff for an initial program is a new approach to alternative education in itself. The opportunities for such justifiable gains in both the undergraduate college and the normal twelve-year school are perhaps a landmark in the new rise of educational programs.

It is hoped that the benefits of this type of program for the students involved will be a far-reaching development of and encouragement for the learning process. The freedom to learn, to ecstatic fulfillment of one's curiosity and capacity, is the gift we should hope to endow to our posterity.